DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 663 CG 032 736

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TITLE	Adolescent Perceptions of Career and Occupation.
PUB DATE	2002-01-00
NOTE	10p.; For full text: http://www.contactpoint.ca/natcon-conat/2002/pdf/pdf-02-01.pdf.
AVAILABLE FROM	Paper presented at the Annual NATCON Convention (28th, Jan. 21-23, 2002; Ottawa, Ontario). NATCON stands for National Consultation on Career Development.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescent Attitudes; Adolescents; *Career Education; *Career Exploration; Career Guidance; Developmental Stages; Foreign Countries; *Needs Assessment; *Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS	Canada

ABSTRACT

A Comprehensive Career Needs Survey was designed to assess the career needs of junior high- and senior high-school students in Southern Alberta. The questionnaire explored career needs from the perspective of students, teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators. An important aspect of the research was to examine how adolescents perceive the terms career and occupation, and to also determine if and how these perceptions evolve over time and through developmental stages. Results suggest that the way students conceptualize the terms occupation and career do not quantitatively differ across grade level, nor are there any conceptualizations specific to one grade level. However, the way in which these students think about career and occupation becomes much richer as they get older. The results suggest a need for earlier career education, clearer articulation of career exploration activities with student perceptions of career and occupation, and increased adolescent involvement in future needs assessments. (Contains 12 references.) (Author)

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Adolescent Perceptions of Career and Occupation

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INTRODUCTION

A needs assessment is a common early step in the creation of programs that are specific to the needs of the consumer. In the case of programs designed to help adolescents with career planning, the needs are often inferred by adults, rather than articulated by the adolescents for whom the programs are designed. Fortunately, students are increasingly being involved in needs assessment research (c.f., Collins 1993; Collins 1998; Drefs 2000; Gordon 2000; Hiebert, Collins, and Robinson 2001; Hiebert, Kemeny, and Kurchak 1998; Kemeny 1997; Lehmanowsky 1991; and Roy 1995). This inclusion of student responses is a result of the recognition that adolescents may be the best source for identifying their own needs and that including student perceptions could increase the accuracy of needs assessment results (Hiebert, Collins, and Robinson 2001).

One area of youth perception-checking that has received very little attention but that is foundational to most career programs is the understanding that young people have of terms such as *occupation* and *career*. The meanings that adolescents attach to these terms are potentially limiting factors in their career behaviour and decision-making. For example, if they think of a career as a long-term commitment to a single (usually professional) occupation, they may quickly disengage from any career planning, in the belief that it has no relevance to their lives. Thus, a fundamental need for effective career program development is to determine how participants conceive of core constructs such as career, and to use that information to design more effective engagement strategies (c.f., Magnusson 1992).

The following study investigated how the terms *career* and *occupation* were perceived by adolescents, and how these perceptions change from Grades 7 to 12. The results suggest that the specific perceptions of occupation and career may be found in all of Grades 7 to 12. However, the way in which individuals think about these themes does seem to evolve through developmental stages, with the terms taking on richer, more vibrant meanings for students as they get older. Given these developmental differences, it is important to consider student perceptions in order to accurately address their career development needs.

METHODOLOGY

The Comprehensive Career Needs Survey was designed by Magnusson and Bernes (2001) to assess the career needs of junior high- and senior high-school students, within Southern Alberta. The questionnaire consisted of five different forms: parent, administration, CALM teachers/counsellors, teachers, and students. The survey contained questions regarding the individual evaluation of career education and support needs within each particular school. In this article, the responses of junior high- and senior high-school students to the questions "What does the term *occupation* mean to you? and "What does the term *career* mean to you?" are explored.

Sampling and data collection
Student responses from schools located in each category of large communities (10,000 or more), medium-sized communities (more than 1,000 but less than 10,000) and smaller communities (less than 1,000) were randomly extracted from the sample.

Twenty randomly selected responses were collected from each grade level, within each community size. These responses were compared against other responses and reviewed as to their frequency relative to other themes. Data was examined to ensure that no new themes were found for each particular grade, in order to verify that data saturation had been reached.

Data analysis
When coding the data, every written statement was examined and themes were extracted. The codes that were developed were formed into categories and analyzed according to the similarities and differences in the responses.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In order to provide the study with greater information regarding the frequency of themes that are present within each grade and across grade levels, a chi-square analysis was performed. Within each grade 50 questionnaires were randomly extracted and assigned to a pre-existing theme. After each response had been assigned to one or more themes, the frequency count was statistically computed using SPSS.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Junior high-school responses
Grade 7
Five theme categories were created from the Grade 7 student responses: (1) job, (2) choice/aspire, (3) field of work, (4) earning a living, and (5) something you do. Few differences appeared to emerge between the definition of *occupation* and *career,* for Grade 7 students (mostly 12- and 13-year-olds.) Often students defined both terms exactly the same way. These results would suggest that this age group does not see a distinction between the terms *occupation* and *career.*

The theme of job was a common response for this grade level when defining both *career* and *occupation.* Sometimes the student would answer with "a job" for both terms and fail to provide any distinction between the two terms. Most often, however, students would attribute the job theme to both definitions, but would qualify their responses by differentiating between them on the duration of the job.

Individual responses also distinguished career jobs from occupational jobs by suggesting that career jobs involve choices or goals to aspire

to. Some examples of the responses, associated with *career* are (1) longterm job that you need schooling for, (2) something you choose, or (3) what you want to do when you grow up. *Occupation* was sometimes defined as "a job you didn't plan on having," or "how you earn money for the time being." These responses continue to refer to the duration or permanency of jobs; however, they also suggest that an occupation is a job that is not by choice, but of necessity. Career, on the other hand, is something that people want to do and choose to participate in through extra schooling and education

The "field of work" theme is most often associated with the definition of *career*. For example, *career* was defined as (1) something you work in or want to work in, (2) what your occupation revolves around, (3) the government in different positions, or (4) field of study you are in. These responses suggest that some of the students believe that career is the field or category of work that an individual participates in, while occupation is most often associated with the specific job that is performed and the monetary reinforcement affiliated with it.

"Earning a living" is also associated with both occupation and career. Although monetary reinforcement is mentioned in both definitions of occupation and career, it is most often associated with occupation. By attributing extrinsic motivational factors as the primary reason for performing the task, this often decreases the perceived value of occupation in relation to career.

The theme "something you do" is an applicable theme for both occupation and career. Often this theme is paired together with "earning a living," such as "something you do to earn a living." However, this theme often is presented by itself.

Grade 8

Grade 8 participants comprise mostly 13- and 14-year-old students. Similar to Grade 7 students, Grade 8 students perceived occupation as temporary, paid employment. Career was viewed as permanent, chosen employment, or as a specific field of work. However, some additional themes did appear to emerge.

The concept of responsibility is mentioned for the first time when defining *occupation*. This may be a result of the fact that occupation is associated with earning money; therefore in order to pay bills you must be responsible and maintain your occupation. Jobs are not only associated with extrinsic rewards but the desire for security and taking care of family.

Grade 8 students associate the theme "what you do" with the definition of *career*. This theme was expressed as: what you do for your life; what you want to do with your life; something you do.

"History of occupations" becomes a reoccurring theme in Grade 8. For example, career is identified as a job after a period of time or a history of occupations in the past. Not only does this theme reflect a greater understanding of the distinction between career and occupation, but it represents the definition suggested by career counselling theorists, such as Super (1990).

In Grade 8, the majority of responses still involve the themes of "jobs" and "aspiration/choice." A greater variety of "choice" themes exist (for example, chosen pursuit in life) and seem to continue to increase in frequency.

Grade 9

For Grade 9 students (approximately 14 and 15 years of age), the theme field of work begins to become more prevalent when defining *career.* A greater emphasis is placed on intrinsic motivational factors and the theme of "enjoyment." Enjoyment appears to be most often associated with career, while occupation is something you have to do.

There appears to be an increase in the belief that additional skill or training is associated with career and not necessarily with occupation. In past examples, when additional training was specified, it referred to university or college training. Within the Grade 9 sample, students included vocational training in their definitions of additional skill or training. This reflects a broadening of training experiences and perceptions of additional education.

With each additional grade, there is an increase in the ability to differentiate between the two definitions. Although there are instances where no distinction is provided, at Grade 9 this is reduced from those of earlier grades.

High-school responses

Grade 10

Grade 10 students are 15 and 16 years of age. Many of the same themes continue to be evident during this developmental stage; however, many new themes also begin to emerge. There does not appear to be an elimination of early themes, and themes appear to increase in complexity.

Grade 10 responses significantly differentiated from the junior high-school responses due to the increase in "life roles" themes being associated with career. For example, *career* is defined as: (1) your family, job, and life, and (2) the way you live your life (occupation, leisure time, job).

No longer is career considered just a permanent job that the individual likes; instead it is affiliated with all aspects of life, beliefs, and roles. The introduction of "life role" themes at this stage may be particularly

important because of the increased interest in identity that emerges during adolescence.

In addition, responsibility becomes a more prevalent theme for career. Statements such as "commitment to your choice of work," and "job long-term and commitment" begin to emerge. What was once considered to be long-term is now expressed as commitment or dedication.

Grade 10 students define *occupation* as a job for a certain period of time or a job for a certain part of your life. *Career* is defined as many different jobs in a career or everything you have done—places you have worked. Although these perceptions can be classified into pre-existing themes (temporary job, history of occupations), the accuracy of these definitions suggests a maturity of terminology that was not evident at earlier stages of development. This may be a result of increased critical thinking skills and expressive vocabulary or increased exposure through Career and Life Management (CALM) course instruction at this grade level. This leads us to question whether Grade 8 students would achieve the same benefits of CALM if they were to receive this instruction in Grade 8, considering they are able to conceptualize these themes.

Grade 11

Grade 11 students are approximately 16 and 17 years of age. Career themes associated with commitment and lifelong dedication continue to emerge as the most prominent within this grade. The belief that a career is a job that is performed for the remainder of your professional life is evident. However, what continues to emerge with each increasing grade is the concept of career as a history of occupations. Not only does this most closely resemble Super's (1990) definition of career, but it also implies the reality of employment.

Grade 12

Grade 12 participants consisted of students of 17 and 18 years of age. Responses recorded by Grade 12 students did not differ a great deal from those of Grade 11 students. There continues to be an increase in identity and history of occupation themes.

A new phrase is apparent in Grade 12 responses, which is "what you want to contribute to society." This need to make a difference in society may indicate the moral stage of development during adolescence, which may influence future occupational choices due to the need to benefit others and society.

As in other grades, the themes of "job" (permanent/temporary), "choice," and "field of work" continue to exist. What is noticeable is the overall distinction between the perceptions of career and occupation that emerge with each developmental stage.

SUMMARY

Occupation continues to be defined by the students as primarily a short-term job, necessary in order to make a living. *Career* is defined as a lifelong job that you choose or aspire to perform in a specific field. However, there appears to be an increase in associating career with "life-roles," "history of occupations" themes, and a "contribution to society" as students age.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The results of the chi-square analysis suggest that there is no significant difference in frequency of themes within grade levels and no significant difference between themes across grade levels. This may be due to the fact that the themes were deemed to be either present or absent. In other words, the precision of measurement was not specific enough to find quantitative significance through the chi-square tests. Despite the fact that the quantitative results did not show significance, the qualitative results suggest that there was increased complexity of responses at each progressive grade level.

DISCUSSION

It appears that although many individuals do not distinguish between the terms *occupation* and *career,* individuals across developmental stages do consider these terms in very different ways. The results of the chi-square analysis suggest that the frequency of themes within each grade and the difference between themes across grade levels are not significantly different. Therefore, junior high- and senior high-school students are capable of thinking about career and occupation within very similar themes. This research suggests that both junior high- and senior high-school students are capable of thinking about career and occupation regardless of their developmental stage. However, what was also clear throughout this study is that although the themes of occupation and career did not differ, the way in which individuals think about these themes evolves though developmental stages.

The implication of these results suggests support for earlier career counselling instruction. Although later grades appeared to have a greater ability to conceptualize themes and concepts, the younger students did consider these themes but at a more concrete level. Therefore, because those concepts are being considered, earlier career instruction may encourage earlier exploration, thus enable older students to progress to more advanced exploration, which may involve greater career skill development and employability skills. As an educator, the best way to achieve all of these goals is to teach more about career process, rather than focusing on occupational information. Since individuals are capable of conceptualizing these ideas, addressing the process of career and its developmental nature would encourage students to view their career search as an expression of identity and self. Failure to create this insight in

adolescents may result in a fixation on finding a job, rather than creating a career.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The limitations of this study are related to both the qualitative and quantitative research methodology. The survey approach and direct focus on these two questions provided little deviation from the subject matter. As a result of this concern, there is some question about the thinness of data that has resulted from this approach, which might have been eliminated by an interview format.

Problems in the design of the quantitative methodology resulted in an inefficient measurement of the frequency of themes that existed. Had the device been designed to measure variations in responses of themes, such as a rating scale, greater information regarding detail of response, and evolution of themes would have been acquired.

AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research into the possible benefits that junior high-school students might obtain from earlier career counselling and the resulting changes in career development that senior high students may experience, would provide information and create greater insight into the potential benefits of earlier career education. Greater inclusion of student perceptions of needs will provide program designers with rich and accurate information that will benefit all stakeholders. Future research on the themes of "occupation" and "career" may focus specifically on investigating how a particular theme evolves throughout developmental stages.

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